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## THE NUMERICAL DECLINE OF DISSENT IN ENGLAND PREVIOUS TO THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

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Since about the year 1770 the numerical increase of Dissent has been remarkable. Its numbers, throughout England, have not grown uniformly: the increase has been sectional, and confined chiefly to industrial areas. So much is this the case that we are entitled almost to regard the strength of Dissent in the nineteenth century as an industrial phenomenon; or, at least, to place it among the social accompaniments of the industrial revolution. This view is borne out by what we can determine about the state of Dissent before the industrial revolution. Within the fifty or sixty years preceding 1770, Dissent, as this paper goes to show, declined numerically to a considerable extent; but again not uniformly. Losses in one section and gains in another showed that a new grouping was in process which already pointed to certain industrial areas as the regions in which Dissent was later to display its vigor. The connection between the industrial revolution and the numerical strength of Dissent is thus confirmed.

The bearing of the period before 1770 upon this general view depends partly upon statistics of the numerical strength of Dissent, partly upon a study of its sectional distribution. For the later period—that is to say, for the nineteenth century—it is comparatively easy to determine, at any given time, the relative strength of Anglicans and Nonconformists. But for the earlier period—roughly speaking, for the century following the Toleration Act—the statistical problem requires critical manipulation. In the writing of eighteenth-century history there is at present a need for more definiteness concerning the numerical strength of Dissent. So far, both in special and in general works, we have on this subject only metaphors and inferences without a statistical basis.

Thus, for instance, we find Justin McCarthy, in his entertaining *Reign of Queen Anne*, refers to the question as follows:<sup>1</sup> "Nothing could be more certain than the fact that Dissent in the time of Queen Anne was growing and spreading day after day among English communities. Nothing indeed could have been more natural among all the changing conditions of the time." And further:<sup>2</sup> "The most energetic attempts to suppress Nonconformity only seemed to add to the strength and increase the numbers of the Nonconformists."

When we come to ask how this conclusion is reached, we can only gather from the context that Justin McCarthy reasoned somewhat in this way: The Occasional Conformity Act and the Schism Act in the hands of the High Church party were intended to be repressive measures.<sup>3</sup> These measures could have been prompted only by the threatening increase of Dissent; therefore, it is safe to infer that Dissent was increasing. In other words, the harsh character of two pieces of legislation is taken as evidence that the number of those to be persecuted was growing—an inference we can never make safely in English history.

Then too, to take a second instance, Professor Richard Lodge, of Edinburgh, in Vol. VIII of the *Political History of England*, speaks of Dissent in 1688 as constituting, since the days of Shaftesbury, the "backbone of the Whig party."<sup>4</sup> This is an unfortunate and a misleading metaphor, tending to create a wrong impression. Neither upon the ground of numbers nor of political influence can the Dissenters be assigned any such anatomical importance. For it is not until about two centuries later that the term "backbone" can be applied either with safety or with appropriateness to the position of Dissent in a political party.

Statements of this kind disclose the need of a more critical and authoritative estimate of the numerical strength of Dissent during the period under discussion. Yet such statements hardly deserve

<sup>1</sup> McCarthy, *Reign of Queen Anne* (Harpers, 1902), I, 67.      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 335.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Skeats, *History of the Free Churches of England* (London, 1869), p. 197: "The increased numerical power and social influence of Dissent operated as a restraint on the indulgence of these intolerant passions."

<sup>4</sup> Richard Lodge, *The Political History of England*, Vol. VIII, "England 1660-1702" (1910), p. 306.

to be censured, for the simple reason that the whole subject still requires elucidation. This paper attempts to make only a beginning in this direction.

For such a study, the material, mostly in manuscript form, is fragmentary and not very extensive. We have to begin with a document, often quoted, of the year 1688. It is a return from an Order-in-Council, sent out at the instance of William III, who wished, so it is thought, to ascertain as accurately as possible the relative numerical strength of Anglicans and Nonconformists. The return is in the Cole MSS in the British Museum; it is also printed, in part, in Dalrymple's *Memoirs*.<sup>1</sup> Upon what principle the figures were obtained it would be impossible to say. The result is best shown in the form of a ratio: the Nonconformists and the Anglicans were to one another as 1 to 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ . Upon that basis, assuming the population to have been then about five and a half millions, we can see that the Toleration Act was framed in the interests of about 250,000 Dissenters.

In the next place, every Dissenting house of worship, under the Toleration Act, had to be registered. The records of this registration, duly made in the bishops' or archdeacons' courts, or by the clerks of Quarter Sessions, seem to have been well kept. In 1852 they were all collected, classified, and printed by the registrar-general. They afford a table of certain phases of the progress of Dissent which is invaluable (this table is referred to later).

Further, there is unpublished manuscript material available, all of which is in the Williams Library in London. It is catalogued under the title: *MSS Records of Nonconformity in the 18th Century*.<sup>2</sup> This material is still waiting to be explored critically. It contains, among other records, two bound volumes known as the Evans List, of the date 1715, and the Thompson List, of the date 1773.

The Evans List, the compilation of a certain Dr. John Evans, a Dissenting clergyman of London, is a comprehensive directory of

<sup>1</sup> Dalrymple, *Memoirs of Great Britain*, II, chap. i, Part 2, Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> "MSS Records of Nonconformity and of Dissenting Institutions" is the book title. Dr. William Black, who originally catalogued the manuscripts, writes in a descriptive note of the two lists referred to below as being "most valuable historical and statistical works, compiled by Dr. John Evans and the Rev. Josiah Thompson of Clapham, who appears to have spent almost half of his life in these researches."

the three denominations.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Evans had in each county a correspondent from whom he obtained a complete list of the Dissenting congregations within the county. The list gives the denomination of each congregation, the names of its preachers, the number of "hearers," their social status, and their political strength in local elections. The list has been drawn upon occasionally for local denominational history, but it has never been used so far for comparative statistics.

The Thompson List,<sup>2</sup> by the Rev. Josiah Thompson of Clapham, is comparative. Thompson not only gives his own statistics for 1733, compiled in the same manner as the Evans List, but he inserts at the same time the figures of a list for 1715, drawn up by a certain Mr. Neal. The original manuscript of the Neal List has been lost, so that its copy in the Thompson directory is a particularly fortunate thing, because it gives us two sets of figures for the year 1715—the Evans List and the Neal List—which are so little different in their totals as to bear one another out in point of accuracy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The conclusions in this paper are based upon statistics for the so-called three denominations—Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist. Of the other denominations it is impossible to secure statistical information. In the registration under the Toleration Act, 67 sects are distinguished as recording places of worship. They are as follows: Aitkin's Christian Instruction Society, Arminians, Arminian Bible Christians, Baptized Protestants, Baxterians, Bethel Union Society, Bible Christians, Brethren, Brigamites, Calvinists, Chartist Religionists, Children of Sion, Church of England, Christian Believers, Christian Band Society, Christian Pilgrims, Christian Revivalists, Christians, Christian Society, Christian Society of Harmony, Christian Union, Countess of Huntingdon Persuasion, Disciples of Christ, Dissenters, Evangelical Arminians, Episcopalians, Established Church, Evangelical Unionists, Followers of Peace, Free Thinking Christians, Friendly Society, Holy and Apostolic Church, Home Missionaries, Huntingtonians, Independent Bible Christians, Independent Millenarians, Jews, Latter Day Saints, Millenarians, Moravians, Mormonites, New Church, New Jerusalem Church, New Jerusalemites, Peculiar Calvinists, Philadelphians, Plymouth Brethren, Primitive Christian Dissenters, Providence Society, Providence Union Society, Ranters, Rational Religionists, Revivalist Community, Sandemanians, Seceders, Separatists, Shilohites, Social Institution, Sons of Sion, Southcottonians, Trinitarians, Unitarians, Unitas Fratrum, United Brethren, United Friends, Universalists, Universal Millenarian Church.

One can only surmise that numerically many of them must have been insignificant.

<sup>2</sup> *MSS Records of Nonconformity, No. 5.* The State of the Dissenting Interest in the Several Counties of England and Wales Collected in the years 1715-1773.

<sup>3</sup> The original manuscript of the Neal List cannot be traced. There is known to have been extant throughout a part of the eighteenth century a third list, entitled: *An Essay or Enquiry into the State of Nonconformity in England and Wales, A.D. 1717.* This list was kept in the library of a Baptist church in the Mill Yard. Of this list there is now no trace.

Turning for a moment to the Evans List, we find the following returns. The number of congregations for which figures were received totaled 778. This was not the total number of congregations reported, but only the number for which the numerical strength was indicated. Taken collectively, the 778 congregations included some 230,000 hearers. The two totals—that is, the number of congregations on the one hand and on the other the number of hearers—make it possible to determine, though indeed very roughly, the average size of a Dissenting congregation of the period. Some congregations, we know, were of unusual size. Twenty had more than 1,000 hearers each, and church buildings of a size to correspond.<sup>1</sup> A large number had over 750 each. Others again were inconsiderable, reporting only 20 or 30 hearers. The average would seem to be something under 300; but for practical application a smaller average would be fairer, on the assumption that the unreported congregations would necessarily be small. For general application an average coming between 300 and 250 would seem to be reasonable. Now there are in the Evans List 1,100 separate congregations of the three denominations accounted for; and in the Neal List, compiled as we have seen, independently, 1,088. Applying the average, the total numerical strength of Dissent in 1715 would be determined at something between 330,000 and 275,000, with the probabilities in favor of the smaller total.

Taking the Thompson List, compiled in 1773—that is, fifty-eight years after the Evans and Neal Lists—we find a total among the three denominations of 1,075 congregations only; a number slightly less than those for the year 1715. To be specific, the number of congregations reporting in 1773 was less than the number in 1715 by about twenty-five. If we bear in mind that in the interval of not quite sixty years the population of England had been increasing, the relative decline of Dissent appears the more striking.

Considering for a moment the absolute as distinguished from the relative decline, there is reason to believe that the lowest point

<sup>1</sup> Exeter, 1,100; Manchester, 1,515; Liverpool, 1,158; Bolton, 1,094; Chowbent, 1,064; London (Hand Alley), 1,000; Nottingham, 1,400; Bristol, 1,600 and 1,200; Taunton, 2,000; Frome, 1,000; Gosport, 1,000; Sheffield, 1,163; Neath, 1,006.

was touched at some time between 1730 and 1750. We have abundant evidence to show that in these two decades Nonconformist clergymen thought the outlook for Dissent quite hopeless.<sup>1</sup> The "Old Dissent," as it was called, with its rather forbidding theology ceased to attract hearers. Congregations declined in number.<sup>2</sup> Many of the gentry gave up attendance, leaving the chapel to what were described as the "meaner sort." Not a few preachers broke up their congregations by accepting episcopal ordination and found livings within the Establishment.<sup>3</sup> But more particularly the registration of Dissenting places of worship, as required by the Toleration Act, points to the declining character of Dissent at this point in the century.<sup>4</sup> This registration shows for these two decades an average of less than three new permanent church buildings recorded each year. A few decades later Dissenters were building not three but two hundred and fifty permanent churches a year, and registering nearly five hundred temporary places of worship.

We are led to the conclusion, therefore, that the figures in the Thompson List of 1773 belong to a period of recovery. (The recovery was not due, as might be supposed, to Wesleyan influence,

<sup>1</sup> In a pamphlet of the year 1731, entitled *Some Observations on the Present State of the Dissenting Interest*, Dissent is referred to as a "sinking cause."

<sup>2</sup> Halley, *Lancashire, Its Puritanism and Nonconformity*, II, 379, gives Dr. Priestly's computation that in the reigns of the first two Georges the Dissenters had diminished by a third of their original numbers.

<sup>3</sup> Many instances of these could be collected from the lists. Thus, for example (Evans List): "Swallow Street in Picadilly—Thomas Ely, Baptist, Conformed, and the Meeting dissolved."

<sup>4</sup> In *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852-53, Vol. LXXVIII, No. 156, "Returns of Dissenters' Places of Worship," the registration is indicated by decades as follows:

Year	Temporary	Permanent	Year	Temporary	Permanent
1688-90.....	796	145	1731-40.....	424	24
1691-1700.....	1,247	32	1741-50.....	502	27
1701-10.....	1,219	41	1751-60.....	703	55
1711-20.....	875	21	1761-70.....	701	85
1721-30.....	448	27	1771-80.....	778	158

By 1852 there had been since the Toleration Act a total registration of 54,804 places of worship of which some 20,000 were at that time actually in use.

for the Wesleyan congregations numbered in 1770 only 25,000 hearers approximately.<sup>1</sup>)

This recovery, if we may so regard it, was not uniform throughout England, but marked by sectional differences. Such at least may be inferred from the letters from his county correspondents which Thompson has in some cases transcribed into his list; many give a gloomy picture of the state of Dissent, a few only report a prosperous outlook.<sup>2</sup> But it may be gathered also from the statistics for the counties taken separately. Thus in certain counties, between the years 1715 and 1773, there had been no perceptible decrease or increase. The figures for twelve of these counties show 361 congregations for 1715, for 1773 but 347.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The following figures relating to the Wesleyans were transcribed by Thompson from a notebook of one of John Wesley's friends:

County	1770	1773	County	1770	1773
Bedfordshire.....	270	282	Wiltshire N.....	806	872
Bristol.....	1,236	1,360	York.....	1,157	510
Cheshire.....	505	1,623	Sheffield.....	597	910
Cornwall.....	1,311	1,994	Leeds.....	1,355	1,902
Devonshire.....	482	425	Birstal.....	965	1,185
Derby.....	883	1,057	Bradford.....	807	900
Essex.....	126	....	Haworth.....	1,333	1,212
Kent.....	289	311	Yarmouth.....	1,034	874
London.....	2,292	2,442	Whitehaven.....	235	272
Lancashire S.....	1,406	987	Gloucester.....	....	420
Lancashire N.....	737	724	Hull.....	....	620
Lincolnshire E.....	717	739			
Lincolnshire W.....	760	650	Total.....	25,365	33,839
Newcastle.....	1,862	1,716			
The Dales.....	912	1,053			
Norfolk.....	231	485			
Oxfordshire.....	354	442			
Staffordshire.....	1,138	631			
Sussex.....	182	223			
Wiltshire S.....	323	340			

To these last columns may be added:

Scotland.....	581	730
Ireland.....	3,124	5,013
Wales.....	346	370

The figures for America, of the date 1773 are placed at 1,000.

<sup>2</sup> The material contained in these transcribed letters and descriptions would be invaluable for local denominational history, also for the vicissitudes of Dissenting congregations in the eighteenth century.

3

County	1715	1773	County	1715	1773
Devonshire.....	61	58	Norfolk.....	20	22
Essex.....	52	50	Northampton.....	40	37
Gloucester.....	51	49	Rutland.....	6	5
Hereford.....	8	9	Warwickshire.....	18	19
Huntingdon.....	13*	13*	Worcester.....	18	16
Kent.....	52	46			
Lincoln.....	22	23	Total.....	361	347

\*Skeat, *Hist. Free Churches of England*, p. 280, in making use of one of these lists has reversed the figures for Huntingdon, printing them as 31 instead of 13. His totals are consequently incorrect.



Again, eighteen counties show a distinct decrease, having 506 congregations in 1715, but in 1773 only 396.<sup>1</sup> However, ten counties indicate an increase, having a total of 221 congregations in 1715; advancing to 320 in 1773, an average gain of ten congregations to a county.<sup>2</sup> These are in the north principally, and include Northumberland, Durham, York, Lancashire, Cheshire, and Nottingham. Thus we see the six northern counties displaying a noticeable vigor, in contrast to others where Dissent either just held its own, or actually declined.

So far as it is possible to rely upon authentic lists, and to estimate reasonable averages, we are led to conclude that between the years 1688 and 1715 the numerical strength of Dissent increased slightly. From 1715 to the middle of the century there was a perceptible decline, followed later by a partial recovery under conditions connected with the shifting of population to the north. Finally in 1773 the numerical strength of Dissent was scarcely greater than in 1688. But taking into consideration the increase of population in the meantime—for it had probably doubled—the ratio of 1 to 22 and a fraction for the year 1688 falls to a ratio of about 1 to 40 for the year 1773; a relative decline which emphasizes the magnitude of whatever influence has since given Dissent the majority it seems now to have in English society.

1

County	1715	1773	County	1715	1773
Bedford . . . . .	23	17	Middlesex . . . . .	91	70
Berkshire . . . . .	26	14	Oxford . . . . .	14	11
Cambridge . . . . .	23	19	Shropshire . . . . .	15	10
Cornwall . . . . .	12	8	Somerset . . . . .	55	50
Cumberland . . . . .	19	16	Suffolk . . . . .	34	30
Derbyshire . . . . .	28	25	Surrey . . . . .	20	13
Dorset . . . . .	35	25	Stafford . . . . .	17	14
Hampshire . . . . .	32	28	Westmoreland . . . . .	5	3
Hertfordshire . . . . .	26	19			
Leicester . . . . .	32	24	Total . . . . .	506	396

2

County	1715	1773	County	1715	1773
Buckingham . . . . .	17	25	Nottingham . . . . .	8	17
Cheshire . . . . .	21	25	Sussex . . . . .	16	19
Durham . . . . .	9	15	Wiltshire . . . . .	20	37
Lancashire . . . . .	47	62	Yorkshire . . . . .	48	68
Monmouth . . . . .	8	13			
Northumberland . . . . .	27	39	Total . . . . .	221	320